

Diversity and the Politics of Knowledge

Remarks prepared for the concluding session of an international Policy Forum on “Planning for Diversity: Education in Multi-Ethnic and Multicultural Societies” at the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), Paris, June 19-20, 2003

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I start out with three observations:

1. The issue of “diversity” goes even further than discussed at this conference. Specifically, we tend to underestimate the importance of knowledge as a basic factor in diversity – both at the national and at the international level.
2. We will understand diversity much better if we understand it as diversity of “knowledge cultures”, i.e., as diversity in the concept of knowledge, in the institutional arrangements for the production of knowledge, and in the structures of access to knowledge.
3. Understanding diversity as diversity of knowledge also helps to highlight the hierarchical nature of diversity, i.e., the fact that diversity is rarely if ever a setting of equally valued components. The world of knowledge consists of knowledge hierarchies where there is privileged and less privileged knowledge – an “asymmetry of esteem” in Sylvia Schmeckler’s terms or, as more forcefully put by Anne Hickling-Hudson, “epistemic violence”.

These observations require a few explanations:

- a) “Knowledge cultures” are characterized by their own epistemology, their own “rhetoric” (or verbal code for the communication of knowledge), and their own organizational structures for the creation of knowledge.
- b) We are able to think in these terms because we have been liberated from the fiction of a “unified theory of knowledge”, and have reached a point where we can be much more comfortable with a notion of knowledge that
 - is culturally and socially constructed (i.e., ways of knowing vary with culture, with gender, with social class, and with periods of history),
 - reflects structures and relationships of power, of domination and subordination, of inclusion and exclusion (in the sense that knowledge – just as “schools” in M. Obin’s presentation – is “un outil politique”, a political tool).

c) The key question that this notion of diversity as diversity of knowledge raises is the question that Guy Gran asks in the title of a remarkable article: “Whose Knowledge Matters?” (Gran 1986).

In listening to the contributions to this Policy Forum, I have been struck by two seemingly contradictory impressions:

- Nobody talks about knowledge.
- Everybody talks about knowledge.

In other words: The agenda of the diversity of knowledge runs through virtually all of the presentations – and yet it receives very little explicit and systematic attention.

Some of the particularly obvious examples include the following:

- When Cecilia Braslavsky speaks of the “paradoxes of globalization”, which consist of more and more scientific knowledge being produced, while access to it gets more and more unequal – what I have elsewhere called “a new division of labor in the international knowledge system” (Weiler 2003); or
- when Anne Hickling-Hudson writes in her paper that “people in all cultures ... operate within particular epistemologies”; or
- when Audrey Ostler speaks of the particular “mindsets” of migrants and minorities, but also
- when both Professor Daswani and Mamadou Ndoeye speak of the conflict surrounding the issues of bilingualism and multilingualism – because inasmuch as language is both the main access route to knowledge cultures and one of their prime manifestations, the choice between language strategies is also a choice of how to deal with the diversity of knowledge, and it is not at all surprising that these are politically contested choices.

When Charles Ungerleider postulates that “cultural, religious and linguistic differences will be both understood and appreciated”, I submit that this will not be possible without understanding the different cultures of knowledge on which these differences are based. And when Christine Inglis asks “what is culture?” – one important answer is: cultures are ways of knowing.

The examples could go on. This Forum, as many other gatherings of its kind, are rich sources for substantiating the claim of these remarks that diversity is, in a particularly profound and consequential way, diversity of knowledge.

What does all of this have to do with the topic of this concluding session – with “learning to plan together”?

First, and rather generally, it means that planning education under conditions of diversity should be more cognizant to this underlying dimension of “knowledge cultures”.

More specifically, however, this perspective highlights the need to organize “planning for diversity” in such a way as to pay much more attention to higher education.

Educational planning (including this venerable Institute) has always had a rather difficult time dealing with higher education – which does not quite fit the conventional tools and concepts of the craft of educational planning. Against this tradition, I would argue that a more conscious recognition of diversity as diversity of knowledge cultures could open up a new and interesting window on the planning of higher education. After all, it is first and foremost within institutions of higher education that knowledge cultures are generated, sustained, and challenged. It is the institutional framework for the creation and dissemination of knowledge in higher education – including the increasingly important question of “the governance of science” (Fuller 2000) – that may well become one of the more important frontiers for the further development of educational planning.

References

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